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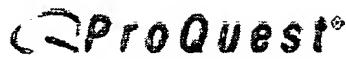
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The Postal Service modestly calls it "the biggest change in mail classification in well over 100 years," a sweeping rewrite in the rules and rates for business mail effective July 1.

Mailers already get some incentives for taking advantage of automation, but classification reform increases those incentives. For example, a mailer who currently presorts and bar-codes mail down to the first three digits of the ZIP code can mail each piece (in a minimum of 500) for 26.4 cents; that will drop to 25.4 cents under the new system. There are even bigger savings for mailers who sort and bar-code mail down to five digits on the ZIP code (23.8 cents, 2 cents better than the old rate) or to the carrier route (23 cents).

Classification reform also gets rid of the **designation** third-class mail, which used to describe bulk-mail advertisements - what people generally think of as junk mail. Third class will be combined with the old fourth class (parcels) into a new grouping known as Standard Mail. Standard Mail also includes new incentive rates for using automation.

Full Text (806 words)*Copyright SEATTLE POST INTELLIGENCER Jun 21, 1996*

The Postal Service modestly calls it "the biggest change in mail classification in well over 100 years," a sweeping rewrite in the rules and rates for business mail effective July 1.

For businesses, classification reform means new incentives, in the form of lower rates, for printing bar codes on the envelope and presorting envelopes, but it also means investment in software to meet the higher standards the Postal Service is requiring.

For consumers, it doesn't mean a lot, at least not directly. The cost of a stamp for your "thank you for the tie" note is still 32 cents, the stamp for your "wish you were here" vacation post card is still 20 cents.

But there are some indirect implications. "Their charter is to maintain the price of a 32-cent stamp," said Neil Dean, vice president at Postal Services Inc. of Washington, a Seattle company providing mail services to business. "They want Aunt Millie to be able to send a Christmas card for 32 cents."

The Postal Service hopes it can do that, at least for a while, by using automation to cut costs. "It creates a structure in which we can maintain rates at a lower level longer," Postal Service spokesman Bob Hoobing said.

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Classification reform also gets rid of the designation third-class mail, which used to describe bulk-mail advertisements - what people generally think of as junk mail. Third class will be combined with the old fourth class (parcels) into a new grouping known as Standard Mail. Standard Mail also includes new incentive rates for using automation.

"This is a major step in which the discounts are quite significant if you're able to automate your mail," Dean said.

Those discounts don't come for free, however. The Postal Service has published detailed specifications about addresses, preparations of trays of mail and the accuracy of address lists. "If you choose to handwrite mail or use a font style that is graphically appealing but not consistent with the standard, you will not benefit from the incentives," Dean said.

Portland-based U.S. Bancorp sends out about 50 million pieces of a mail a year, spokeswoman Cindy Duryee said. Some mail now qualifying for discounts won't after July 1, she said, so the bank will have to make adjustments for the new rules.

"While we expect to see some cost benefit" from the new rate schedule, "any savings would be offset by the cost of preparation of the mail," she added.

U S West Communications, another major mailer, estimates that between reductions on some types of mail and increases on others, the company will save between 4 percent and 6 percent.

The rate structure has prompted some grumbling that it favors large mailers over small ones, a complaint the Postal Service discounted in its publication on the new rules. "The minimum mailing size for First Class or Standard Mail remains unchanged," the publication says.

Small companies may have to resort to a service bureau that has the software and equipment to meet Postal Service requirements or can consolidate several companies' mailings.

Most expect business mailers to adjust. "When they introduced the ZIP code, everyone was against it, but we've come a long way since then," said Bob Schramke, an owner of Lacey & Par Co., a Seattle mail service bureau.

The Postal Service is making the changes against a backdrop of labor unrest. The National Association of Letter Carriers conducted informational picketing around the country earlier this week protesting management practices.

Jo Ann Pyle, president of 2,200-member Branch 79 of the letter carriers union, said the objection isn't so much on automation itself. In fact, a letter carriers' advertisement calls an automated mail preparation system "much needed."

Pyle said the union's objection is that management "refuses to talk to us about anything. . . . They won't talk to us to get our input on how it works."

Postmaster General Marvin Runyon has said the [Postal Service](#) has to reduce labor costs and boost productivity to prevent the defection of major customers.

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[Illustration]

Color Photo; Caption: ROBIN LAYTON/P-I PHOTOS: (1) Joshua Head works a sorter machine that prints bar codes at Postal Services Inc. of Washington, which provides mail services to businesses. (2) Companies that print bar codes on envelopes will be rewarded with incentives from the [Postal Service](#).

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